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A SPEECH by a Member of the House of Commons, on the Commitment of the Bill for better securing the Freedom of Elections of Members to serve for the Commons in Parliament, Jan. 23, 1721.

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K. Great Brit. Parliament Commons Apr.

Mr. Speaker,

THO' I think the Neceſſity of the Bill which has been read to you is of itſelf a ſufficient Argument for it, yet ſince I was one of thoſe who had the Honour of your Commands for bringing it in, it may perhaps be expected that I ſhould ſay ſomething upon it. As therefore there is too much reaſon to apprehend that this is the laſt Struggle you are ever like to have for the Preſervation of your Rights and Liberties, ſo certainly the Efforts of every honeſt Man are more than ordinary requiſite at this critical Juncture, to procure, if it be poſſible, the Choice of a free and independant Parliament, that being the only Means under Providence which can ſave you from that State of Ruin and Confuſion which ſeems ſo immediately to threaten, and to be hanging over you. If you ſhould have the Misfortune to miſcarry, and that the Majority of this Houſe ſhould hereafter be compoſed of Perſons, who have Views and Schemes to purſue repugnant to the common Good and Eaſe of their Country, what elſe muſt you then expect, but the Continuance at leaſt, if not the Increaſe of thoſe heavy Burthens you have already upon you, and at every Turn to ſee the Honour and Sanction of Parliament baſely proſtituted to the deſtructive Meaſures of thoſe who ſhall then happen to be in Power, which without other Means of Violence could not be juſtified and ſupported? If you ſhould be plunged into an unneceſſary and expenſive War; if your Trade and Intereſt ſhould be ſacrificed for the Service of other Princes, and it may be that done too only to engage them to the Conceſſion of foreign Provinces and Acquiſitions, in which *Britain* has not the leaſt Concern; what Redreſs could our Country hope for (even under ſuch Grievances) from Patriots who had themſelves contributed towards them, or were the mercinary Tools and Dependants of thoſe who had? All manner of Licentiouſneſs and publick Frauds would then have their open and avowed Advocates, and it would be no wonder to ſee the greateſt Criminals eſcape unpuniſhed, when the Power of Remiſſion and Pardon of Crimes were ſo much in their own Hands.

It is too notorious what Attempts are now carrying on to invade the Freedom of your approaching Elections; in ſome Places by Threats, to fill and over-run them with the quartering of Troops, if they do not comply; in others, by the corrupt Sollicitations of Agents and Undertakers, employed by thoſe, who, from the incredible Sums which are diſperſed, one muſt imagine have more than private Purſes at their Command.

But what in God's Name can all this tend to? What other Conſtruction can any Man in common Senſe put upon all theſe things, but that there ſeems to have been a formed Deſign, by Violence and Oppreſſion, firſt to humble you, and to make your Necks pliable to the Yoke that is deſigned

for them, and then, to finiſh the Work, by tempting the Poverty and Neceſſities of the People, to ſell themſelves into the moſt abject and deteſtable Slavery, for that very Money which has been either unneceſſarily raiſed, or mercileſly and unjuſtly plundered and torn from their very Bowels? And thus you may be in a fair way of being ſubdued by your own Weapons. Nor can I imagine what Inducement Men can have, who run from Borough to Borough, and purchaſe their Elections at ſuch extravagant Rates, unleſs it be from a ſtrong Expectation of being well re-paid for their Votes, and of receiving ample Recompence and Rewards for the ſecret Service they have covenanted to perform here. In this Situation it is high time for Gentlemen to put themſelves upon their Guard, and if it be not already too late, to endeavour to put a Stop to the Courſe of thoſe Evils, which are otherwiſe likely ſo ſoon to overtake them. It is for theſe Purpoſes that this Bill is now before you, and I hope it either is, or by your Aſſiſtance will be made ſuch, as may fully anſwer the Ends for which you were pleaſed to order it to be brought in.

The Abuſes in the Manner of diſpatching your Writs to the Sheriffs, eſpecially what appeared to you on a late Occaſion, were the Motives which firſt led you into this Conſideration. I am perſuaded the Method here preſcribed to regulate that Matter will be found ſo eaſy and practicable, and ſo little liable to any Objection, that it would be needleſs in me to take up your Time in enlarging upon that Head. But for the Penalties upon falſe Returns, unleſs they are ſettled on the ſevereſt and moſt rigorous Terms, it will be in vain for you to contend with Sheriffs and returning Officers, who, inſtead of the People, in whom the Right is, and ought to be lodged, will draw the whole Power of Elections into their own Hands, and therefore they ought to be tied up to ſuch ſtrict Rules, as that they ſhall never dare upon any Account whatſoever to depart from them, much leſs to be ſubject to thoſe ſort of Influences, which, of all others, you have moſt reaſon to be jealous of. We know, that Perſons heretofore have not only bribed the returning Officer, but have even indemnified him againſt the whole Penalty of Five Hundred Pounds, rather than not get the Return, right or wrong, in favour of themſelves, depending, I ſuppoſe, upon the Strength and Partiality of their Friends to maintain them at any rate in the unjuſtifiable Poſſeſſion of a Seat here; this has been practiſed upon former Occaſions, and therefore there is always juſt Grounds to ſuſpect it will be attempted again. And it is now come to ſuch a Paſs, that if you were even to double that Penalty, without doing ſomething elſe, I am afraid it would have little or no Effect. But when all thoſe Bonds of Indemnity are declared null and void, when the Securities uſually given and taken upon theſe Occaſions are withdrawn, they may then perhaps be deterred, at leaſt from ſo barefac'd a Practice of theſe arbitrary and illegal Proceedings for the future.

Another Expedient for ſecuring the Freedom of your Elections, and which, I think, will more effectually contribute towards it than any one thing whatſoever, is the annulling the Votes of thoſe Swarms of Officers in the Cuſtoms and Exciſe; they are already ſubjected to the Penalty of One Hundred Pounds if they ſhall preſume to intermeddle, this therefore is no more than a natural Conſequence, and a neceſſary Enforcement of what you have done before. The Commiſſioners themſelves of thoſe Branches of the Revenue have been for ſome Time under a Legal Incapacity of ſitting here, as being thought under ſuch ſtrong Ties and Influences, in regard to their Employments, as were inconſiſtent with that Freedom with which Men ought to act in Parliament; certainly then the ſame Rea-

ſon will hold good as to the Votes of them and their inferior Officers, eſpecially in Matters that ſo nearly relate to it. There is likewiſe a Proviſo, that no Perſon ſhall be capable of poſſeſſing any of theſe Offices for a certain Time to be limited, after they ſhall have tendred their Votes in any Election; and the reaſon of that is very plain, without it all this Diſability would ſignify nothing; for by diſplacing them juſt to ſerve a Turn, and reſtoring them again immediately after, the whole Force of this Clauſe would be entirely defeated.

I make no doubt but the Intention was very juſt and commendable of the Gentlemen who brought in the Qualification Act, which was certainly deſigned to eſtabliſh a Landed Property in Parliament, without which I will venture to ſay it will be impoſſible you ſhould be ſafe; but that Matter ſtands at preſent upon ſo looſe a Foot, that I am afraid it has hitherto been of very little Uſe or Service to you. What Dependance, for Inſtance, can you have upon a Man who has no more than Three Hundred Pounds a Year in Land, or perhaps only an Annuity of that Value for Life, and has at the ſame time Thirty or Forty Thouſand Pounds in the Funds, or an Employment of two or three thouſand Pounds a Year Civil or Military from the Crown? and even that ſmall Qualification is no otherwiſe obligatory upon him, but merely to ſwear to his having it, if it be required, at the time of his Election; for tho' he ſells it, or otherwiſe diveſts himſelf of it immediately after, yet it remains a Doubt whether by ſo doing he ſhall vacate his Seat in Parliament. This is certainly ſuch an Omiſſion as requires to be better regulated and explained. There is likewiſe a Saving in that Act in favour of eldeſt Sons of Peers, and the ſame for thoſe of Commoners of Six Hundred Pounds a Year; but I confeſs I am at a loſs to find out upon what Grounds the latter was inſerted, unleſs Care had been taken at the ſame time to have obliged the Father or the Son to have proved the Poſſeſſion of ſuch an Eſtate; for at preſent, let the Circumſtances of the Family be what they will, if the eldeſt Son can procure himſelf to be elected, I cannot ſee but he is entitled to a Seat here, without any farther Examination whatſoever. This is another Defect ſo groſs in your former Act, and opens a Back-door to ſo many Perſons, ſo entirely contrary to the Intent and Meaning of it, that it very well juſtifies the Repeal of it by this Bill; I mean ſo far only as it relates to the eldeſt Sons of Commoners.

Whether the HOUSE will be willing to enact it by a Clauſe, muſt be ſubmitted to them, I only take the Liberty to mention, that it were very much to be wiſh'd that GENTLEMEN of Eſtates and Families in the Country would heartily unite in this Particular of keeping the Elections in their ſeveral Counties among themſelves; that they would reſolve inviolably to ſupport each other's Intereſt againſt the Incroachments and corrupt Applications of Strangers, let them come from what Quarter they will. If this were done, it would in a great meaſure put an end to thoſe dangerous and infamous Practices that are now on foot, and we might hope once more to ſee this Houſe filled with Gentlemen of free and independent Fortunes, ſuch as would be above making their Court any where at the Expence of their Country, and would deſpiſe all manner of ſlaviſh Conceſſions to Men in Power; Miniſters would then be neither able to *skreen* themſelves or their Friends againſt your Enquiries, and the boldeſt and moſt enterpriſing of them would be made to tremble (as the little *Welſh* Judge did the other Day at the Bar) at the Apprehenſions of your Animadverſions upon them; nor ſhould we then, it is to be hoped, ſit tamely here and ſee our Country harraſs'd with the

Expences of fruitleſs Expeditions Abroad, and with the Maintenance of a ſtanding Army at Home, dangerous to our Conſtitution and Liberty.

There are other Parts of your Bill, which I had like to have omitted to have ſpoken to, which are deſigned, if poſſible, to put a Stop to that Torrent of Bribery and Corruption which the Iniquity of the Times has let in upon you; and tho' I have very little Proſpect of any good Effect that way, and whatſoever the Fate of this Bill may be, every Gentleman, I dare ſwear, will ſo far agree, that ſome Method ſhould be taken to prevent ſuch Practices, or the Kingdom muſt be undone. If at this time you had Men at the Head of your Adminiſtration who had ever been charged with, or any way convicted of ſuch Crimes, I own it would be in vain to propoſe this or any other Method to puniſh and diſcourage it. Were it poſſible to believe that the Influences of ſuch Men could prevail here, or in any other Branch of the Legiſlature, it would then be no wonder to ſee this Bill miſcarry, or to hear it treated as a *Compoſition of Abſurdities*, or as a Violation of the Birth-rights of great Numbers of his Majeſty's beſt Subjects. But at preſent this ſhall be no Reaſon with me to anticipate ſo much ill Fortune to it, ſince it is plain it could come before you with no other View, but to reſtore the Freedom and Honour of Parliament, to reſcue the Rights and Liberties of our Country, and to ſave, if it be poſſible, the poor Remnant of our Conſtitution. Theſe are the Conſiderations which occur to me in favour of this Bill; and I humbly move you that it may be committed.

FINIS.